

AASCU

# Task Force

## Calls for a New Compact Between States and Public Higher Education

By William A. Sederburg and Daniel J. Hurley

The leaders of America's public colleges and universities face a critical challenge in shaping the future of their institutions and their states: building a more constructive relationship between their institutions and state political leaders. A new bond between states and institutions must precede a rejuvenated and sustained increase in state investment in higher education necessary to support the public colleges and universities that are so vital to a strong economy and vibrant democracy.

In order better equip higher education leaders' ability to address this challenge, in 2012 AASCU President Muriel A. Howard appointed a Task Force on Making Public Higher Education a State Priority to identify strategies for strengthening the relationship between state government and public higher education. Comprised of leaders with extensive higher education experience at the campus and state level, as well as in elected office, the task force has sought to: explore the political context within which higher education operates; recommend strategies for establishing a new partnership between states and their public colleges and universities; and identify strategies for advancing higher education as a state investment priority.

The task force examined the current context through a decidedly political lens, recognizing that the U.S. faces a paradox in which state policymakers' strong rhetorical support for public higher education is misaligned with the support it receives as a state investment priority. Failure to reverse this trend will lead to a continued state-to-student cost shift that will increasingly jeopardize college affordability, as well as the aspirations of millions of people to join the American middle-class and, ultimately, our nation's economic competitiveness.

### A New Compact

The task force recently released a report entitled, "Creating a New Compact Between States and Public Higher Education" (available at [aascu.org/policy/publications/aascu-special-reports/](http://aascu.org/policy/publications/aascu-special-reports/)). In calling for a new compact, the task force strongly urges that the new partnership between state government and public higher education fully leverages the capacity of public colleges and universities to fortify our economic security and the democratic foundations that underpin our society. The new compact must represent a shared commitment to broadening

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college access, making college more affordable, improving student outcomes and ensuring academic quality. Higher education leaders and state officials must work collaboratively to craft a shared public agenda predicated on mutual understanding, trust and accountability.

## Addressing Challenges

The task force identified key challenges that must be addressed by college leaders in order to gain enhanced trust by policymakers and the public as part of the process of establishing a new compact. One is to address public higher education's change-averse reputation, especially as it involves online and other alternative educational delivery models. It is essential that institutions embrace innovative technology-enhanced program delivery models that can educate more students, enhance learning outcomes and reduce instructional costs. College leaders must also respond to misperceptions policymakers may have about higher education and develop a shared understanding of critical higher education priorities in their state.

## Commitments of Higher Education Leaders

Four actions are recommended by the task force to reassure state policymakers of their commitment to an accessible, accountable and high-quality public higher education system. Establishing a new compact will require dedication to these obligations as well as an equal commitment by state policymakers to provide consistent and sustained financial investment and support for the policy needed to achieve shared state goals. These include:

- Making institutional accountability the foundation of a new compact;
- Building an institutional agenda linked to state needs;
- Addressing college affordability concerns; and
- Conveying institutional outcomes.

## Accounting for State Political Dynamics

Understanding the larger context within which political and higher education leaders operate is essential to crafting a new state compact. Elevating higher education as a state budgetary priority ultimately requires tough choices and actions by political leaders functioning in a political environment. Higher education leaders must understand this landscape and

be willing and able to assist political allies who are navigating within it.

Each state has its own unique higher education governance structure and, more broadly, a distinctive culture, history, demography, economy and, of course, set of political dynamics. Building a common agenda supported by lawmakers and higher education leaders must be accomplished on a state-by-state basis, recognizing the traditions and political culture of each state. A significant share of a college president's time and energy should be expended in first understanding the state's political environment and then becoming a respected actor within it.

## Strategies for Elevating Public Higher Education as a State Investment Priority

The task force identified seven strategies college leaders and advocates can utilize to strengthen the relationship between public universities and state government, as well as to fortify higher education's ability to serve the state. These include:

- Aligning messaging with the state agenda;
- Communicating the public good of public higher education;
- Encouraging others to speak for higher education;
- Utilizing a strategic institutional state relations program;
- Establishing a public engagement master plan;
- Championing the vital role of public comprehensive universities; and
- Emphasizing collaboration and cooperation among education sectors.

## Acting with Urgency

We are hopeful that the task force report will spark a national and state dialogue, and provide some thoughtful guidance on how to elevate higher education as a state investment and policy priority. A healthy sense of purpose and urgency must be infused into the process of acting upon the report's guidance. At stake is our collective ability to maximize the transformative effect that America's public colleges and universities have on individuals' lives and on the very economic and social fabric of our communities, states and nation. Recognizing this, AASCU will continue to energetically assist its members in their efforts to establish a strong relationship with—and commitment by—state political leaders and state government. **P**

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